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A Data Driven Approach to Increasing Court Appointed Special Advocates

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Abstract

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) of Monterey County is an organization that allows volunteers to advocate for the best interest of foster youth who have been abused and/or neglected. CASA advocates are required to turn in an activity log every month in order to inform their advocate supervisor about progress they have made with their youth, and provide information regarding their case. By not turning in an activity log, advocate supervisors do not have updated information on the youth case. It is important to be involved in the youth life that one is assigned, in order to support them through their difficult time of being separated from their families. Getting feedback from advocates through a survey on what they like and do not like about the current activity logs, will allow for growth in the organization. Implementing a new template may raise the percentage of monthly reports being turned in. Agencies in other counties will be able to exchange information, and brainstorm ideas on what will increase monthly advocate participation.

Keywords: C.A.S.A., advocates, activity logs, youth, participation, template

Agency Information and Communities Served

CASA is an organization that stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates, and its mission is “to train and support community volunteers who advocate for abused or neglected children placed in foster care, upholding the children’s rights while pursuing a safe ad permanent home” (CASA of Monterey County, 2018). California Court Appointed Special Advocate Association ensures children in the foster care system have both a voice and the services they need for a stable future (California CASA For Children, 2018). CASA was founded by a Seattle Judge named David Soukup in 1976. Later, in 1984, the National CASA Association was established (National CASA Association, 2017). As for Monterey County, in 1995, CASA was incorporated as a California nonprofit public benefit corporation, and graduated their first class of advocates in May of 1996.

CASA serves foster youth who have been abused and/or neglected, between the ages of 5 and 21. No child choses to be in foster care, a young person’s placement in the foster system necessarily begins with the traumatic experience of being removed from their home and placed in an unfamiliar environment (Braid Missions, 2019). As a CASA, being informed and well educated on the training that the agency provides each individual before stepping foot onto a case, is very important. A person who volunteers must be 21 years of age or older to be able to be appointed as a CASA. After being sworn into court, each individual is assigned to an advocate supervisor, who gives them opportunity to read between a handful of cases that they believe would be best fit for that specific individual. It is completely the CASA advocates decision on which case they chose to be on. This allows for them to have the chance to pick a case where

they feel that they will be able to best fit into assisting the youth that they are going to work with. A CASA advocate is accountable for contacting the child's team, such as their social worker, teacher, foster parents, biological parents, therapist, anyone who is involved in the child's life in some way. CASA's are also responsible for turning in monthly activity logs to their assigned advocate supervisor, in order to update them on what they have been doing with their CASA child. The activity log focuses on what challenges and accomplishments they have faced or witnessed with their CASA. A CASA is also responsible for attending court hearings every 6 months, and any other court hearings that may come up between the times of being assigned on the case. The overall goal of a CASA is to advocate for the best interest of the child.

Before being sworn into court, each individual pursuing the next step in being a CASA advocate, must first interview with the CASA staff. After the interview, they must complete a 40 hour training in which a volunteer "receives specialized training to learn how to navigate the foster care system" (Burke 2015), a background check, and a life scan. They also must provide the agency with their current auto insurance, as well as a declaration page that states how much their auto insurance covers. Once those are all complete, then they are sworn into court as an official CASA advocate and they then get the opportunity to be assigned to a case. A CASA volunteer commits to being with a foster child from the time he or she enters the foster care system until they are either reunified with their birth parents or adopted (Burke, 2015).

Project Description and Implementation Process

One responsibility that CASA advocates are responsible for is turning in monthly activity logs by the first of every month. As an extension, advocates are given until the fifth of the month as a last day to turn in their activity log. Based off of feedback from CASA advocate supervisors in the office, they have provided information that not everyone turns in their activity logs on a

monthly basis. They even mentioned that some do not turn anything in at all. CASA of Monterey County has about a 67% rate of advocates turning in their activity logs, and they would like to see that number increase. By increasing this percentage, it will allow for advocate supervisors to be more aware of the progress of each child that is assigned to a CASA. Rather than only knowing about the ones who turn in their activity logs on a regular basis.

First, developing an anonymous survey to send out to CASA's will allow for the agency to get feedback on the activity log templates that are currently being used. According to Parasuraman, "the key to obtaining good data through a survey is to develop a good survey questionnaire" (Parasuraman, 2019). Once the survey is developed, it will be sent out to each active advocate. This survey will consist of questions such as which of the two activity logs they prefer to use and why, if they understand the importance of turning in activity logs, and what they think could be done to improve the templates. Collecting this data will essentially provide feedback to the CASA staff on what can be improved and what can be changed.

The primary goal of this project, is to create a new layout, that will increase the percentage of individuals turning in their activity logs on a monthly basis. CASA of Monterey expects to get feedback on the layout of the activity logs that they have in play now, to see what it is that individuals would like to see changed, be taken out, or what they think should be added. That way, it will make it more intriguing for CASA's to turn their activity logs in. By creating a form online, that may make it easier to fill out instead of writing out answers in paragraph form. The over-all outcome that the agency strives to see, is the number of people who turn their activity logs in, increase from 67% to high 80/90%. It is important to turn these in on a monthly basis, because it allows for the social worker, the advocate supervisors, and the judge, to see all

the time that CASA's are putting in as an advocate to provide for the best interest of the child that they are working with. It keeps volunteers accountable for what they committed to do.

The problem with not turning in an activity log every month is that it makes it look as if the advocate is not doing anything to help or benefit the child that they were assigned too. Not turning in an activity log means that the advocate supervisors have no proof that the CASA has been seeing their youth, or working with the youth's team. By creating the survey, it will allow for them to see whether individuals just do not like the template, so they do not fill it out, or if the CASA has sort of checked out from the case, and is not visiting the child as often as they should.

From this project, it will cause a positive impact on the agency. By successfully fulfilling this duty, it will allow for the advocate supervisors to feel a sense of relief, and they will not be as stressed out trying to reach the people who do not turn in their activity logs. This project will increase the number of people turning in activity logs monthly, and can also benefit the organization by updating the activity log consistently, every month. So many things are all online now, that maybe in the end if we can develop a new way to fill these activity logs out, potentially more CASA's will take the time to do so. And it will be beneficial to the youth that is served, because CASA advocate supervisors will have up to date information on the case, and on the child themselves.

The very first thing that needs to be developed is the survey. Creating a survey means answering the following questions:

- What is the goal of the survey?
- Why are you creating this survey?
- What do you hope to accomplish with this survey?

- How will you use the data you are collecting?
- What decisions do you hope to impact with the results of the survey? (This will later help identify what data is needed to collect in order to make these decisions) (Survey Monkey, 2018).

The participants in this project will be all 105 active CASA advocates. Staff in the agency will also be contributing their feedback, and providing responses on how they want the data number to increase. Edna Chin (program and education director), Maria Perez (advocate supervisor), Kylie Kelly (advocate supervisor), Stacey Van Hoose-Gunwall (advocate supervisor), and Joan Nugent (advocate supervisor) will all be participating in the research and data that will be collected. In order to get the best results from the survey, feedback from advocate supervisors will be crucial.

Edna proposed this idea because she wants to see a change happen. She wants to make sure that individuals who volunteer, are doing their work and committing to what they signed up for. In order to see a change, according to David A. Shore, from Harvard University, he states that “change happens because people make it happen” (Shore, 2018). As individuals, if we thrive to be the change that we want to see, or strive to work towards our goal, then the change we are imagining, will become reality. Each advocate supervisor will be of assistance, because they will each be providing a list of individuals that they look over, who do not turn in their activity log. They will also be of assistance when creating a new template, as it will be something that they will need to know how to fill out, how to explain to others, and will benefit the organization as well.

One challenge that will arise, is what to do with the data that is collected, and thinking about how to get that number to increase. Hypothetically, it seems like something that would be

easy to do. But realistically, if a change does not begin to occur, then more in depth ideas will need to be thought of. In order to see a change within this project, effort, time, and dedication will be needed. It will be important to ensure to see the change that the organization is looking for.

By increasing the number of individuals participating in their activity logs with their CASA, allows for the organization to have a better inside look on the youth life, and how they are progressing. It also helps to ensure that the youth is getting the help that they need. As already discussed with Joan, implementing a new activity log for future and current advocates could increase the participation on a monthly basis. Hopefully there will be feedback that there was an increase in percentage of individuals turning in their activity logs.

Project Assessment Process

Overall, the goal is to ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the child. By collecting data, and increasing the percentage of individuals participating in one of their duties by turning in their monthly activity log, it also provides the social worker and the youth with guidance and an inside view on the child's case. CASA's are there to help the youth that they are working with feel comfortable and happy, and take their minds off of everything else that is going on in their lives. CASA's are that person who the youth can talk and reach out too. By increasing the percentage of advocates turning in their monthly activity logs, it will keep better track of each youth that is in the foster care system. These youth are looking for a change, with a CASA by their side.

By creating a survey, all active advocates will have the opportunity to voice their opinions, as well as share any ideas they may. Advocates will be asked to give feedback on which of the two current activity log templates they prefer to use and why, and what they do and do not like about

it. They will also have the chance to suggest what they believe might be a more efficient way for advocates to turn their activity logs in on a monthly basis. When advocates submit their responses, they will remain anonymous, as it will ensure that each advocate will share their true and honest opinions. Once the survey is closed, data will be collected in order to provide the agency with feedback and potentially implement a new template that would be used in the future.

Each advocate supervisor will also be providing insight on which of their specific advocates do not turn in an activity log on a monthly basis. From there, advocate supervisors will provide which case those advocates are working on, to assess where the youth is placed, and whether or not they are on track to reunification with their biological parents. All data collected, will be analyzed and shared with Edna, to compare with San Benito and Santa Cruz county.

Findings and Results of Assessment Process

Before the survey was sent out, San Benito and Santa Cruz County shared their monthly data to compare with Monterey County. Esther Curtice, executive director at CASA of San Benito, shared that their percentage of advocates who turn in their activity logs on a monthly basis is 76% (E. Curtice, personal communication, March 25, 2019). Lynne Petrovic, executive director at CASA of Santa Cruz county, shared that their percentage of advocates who turn in their activity logs on a monthly basis is 72% (L. Petrovic, personal communication, March 27, 2019). Though not too much of a difference, both have a higher percentage than Monterey County. Both Curtice and Petrovic shared that their advocates seem to be involved with the youth that they are working with, but they do not always remember that they need to send in updates on a monthly basis, even if nothing has changed. Advocates tend to forget that each activity log that is turned in, is attached to the file of the youth that they are working with.

105 advocates received the survey, and 56 of them responded. Almost half of the advocates participated in providing feedback. When first sending the survey out, the expected outcome of volunteers responding, was not very high, as CASA of Monterey County does not tend to have a high turnout rate of respondents when surveys are sent out. When 56 responses were recorded, it was both shocking and exciting. Most advocates who responded, recorded that they have been CASA's for more than a year. The data that was collected was essential in the next step of progressing forward to increase the monthly percentage of activity logs being turned in. It also made advocates aware that they are being kept track of when they do not turn one in, and they are held accountable for doing so.

Recommendations

Based off of feedback given by advocates, there were multiple responses and ideas given which contributed to developing a new activity log template. Many advocates suggested a voice recording, or being able to call in and leave a message for their supervisor, with updates on their case. But because that does not allow for anything to be printed to be put into the youth file, that would not be able to happen. Advocate supervisors also shared that they would not like for advocates to give updates in that way, because then the advocates supervisors would be given more work, by having to type out the updates for each advocate, and it would put more on their plate.

As for the next intern to come into the organization, with the data that has been collected, a new project that can be implemented would be creating a new template for future use at CASA. Also, continuing to collaborate with CASA of San Benito County and Santa Cruz county, to share and gather ideas from one another will be important to do. Using the feedback collected

from advocates will allow for the next intern to develop new activity log implementations. With the new templates that are created, CASA staff, as well as advocates will be able to discuss what they like and do not like, and which template they would prefer to use over the two that are currently in place.

Conclusion

When developing a survey, it is important to understand the research and data behind it that will be collected. When conducting a survey, it comes down to “sampling, sampling bias, and conducting the survey” (Price, Jhangiani R, & Chiang, 2018). Creating the survey itself had its ups and downs. Putting time and work into creating the survey and getting feedback was essential in ensuring the success of the overall outcome rate. Throughout this past year, it was difficult to imagine what the outcome of this specific project would be. But as it began, and things got started, it was easier to assess the data that has been collected, as well as staying organized. Personally, being able to easily communicate well with the staff in the office, was easy to do. Communication is important going into the work force, as it will help with building relationships and creating a positive image for oneself. Planning and organizing is important to stay on top of and to follow through with. If something goes wrong, or does not go as planned, then another idea needs to be thought of in order to implement the plan that is in mind.

Analyzing why or how it went wrong is also important in reflecting on what could have been done differently. Advocates are required to fill out activity logs every month, so ensuring that they like the new format that is created, will be essential in increasing advocates participation. When going into 396S, go in with a strong head on your shoulders, as well as a driven mind. The last three semesters fly by in the blink of an eye. It is important to create and implement a project that will keep you engaged as well as keep you motivated and on your toes throughout the time

spent where you are placed. Be willing to listen to others ideas, as well as collaborate with staff members at your placement in order to create a change that they would like to see happen.

Getting their input and combining it with your own ideas will make for a structured plan in benefiting the organization. Interning at an organization is an amazing opportunity that us CHHS students are given, make the most of it!

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Appendix A- Project Implementation

Project Implementation Template

Type of Project	Create a survey to collect data on what can be changed within the activity logs, and C.A.S.A's fulfillment
Purpose of Project	To increase the percentage of CASA advocates turning in monthly activity logs; allowing for advocates to show and share the involvement in their CASA youths life.
Implementation Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection process (Why are advocates not turning in activity logs?) • Data analysis • Identify participants • Keep track of data collected • Assess success
Outcome Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency accepts new template of activity logs • Agency implements changes to current activity log • Number of participants increases • Advocates satisfaction with new template style increases monthly activity logs percentage
Assessment Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a survey to ask advocates about their thoughts on the current monthly activity log templates • Survey will ask which template advocates use more often and what draws their attention to one more than the other • Survey will ask what advocates would like to see change, and what would get them to be more involved and timely with their monthly activity logs

Appendix B- Survey

Data Driven Approach to Increasing CASA Compliance

Hello Advocates,

Please read the survey and answer the questions as frankly as possible. Remember that all responses will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your time,

Desiraye Kesterson

1. How long have you been a CASA?
2. Approximately how many hours per month do you spend with your CASA youth?
 - a. 5 hours or less
 - b. 5-10 hours
 - c. 11-15 hours
 - d. 16 hours or more
3. Was it made clear to you why activity logs are required to be submitted on a monthly basis?
 - a. Very clear
 - b. Clear
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Not clear
 - e. Completely clear

4. How do you value the following purposes for completing your activity log?
 - a. Providing updated information on a monthly basis for court reports
 - i. Very high value
 - ii. Somewhat high value
 - iii. Neutral
 - iv. Somewhat low value
 - v. Very low value
 - b. Compiling information for advocate supervisors with updates on my case
 - i. Very high value
 - ii. Somewhat high value
 - iii. Neutral
 - iv. Somewhat low value
 - v. Very low value
 - c. Providing required quantitative information for Judicial Council
 - i. Very high value
 - ii. Somewhat high value
 - iii. Neutral
 - iv. Somewhat low value
 - v. Very low value
 - d. Thoroughly completing all requested information
 - i. Very high value
 - ii. Somewhat high value
 - iii. Neutral

iv. Very low value

5. Which activity log do you prefer to use?
 - a. Advocate Activity Report- Which includes detailed check boxes and comment box
 - b. My CASA Monthly Update- Which includes individual questions to be answered

6. How often do you complete and submit your activity log?
 - a. Always
 - b. Most times
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Never

7. What do you like about the activity log template that you use?

8. What don't you like about the activity log template that you use?

9. Please provide suggestions of alternative ways you would like to complete your monthly activity log

10. If you had an alternative way of submitting your monthly activity log, how likely would you be to submit it?
 - a. Very likely
 - b. Likely
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Unlikely
 - e. Very Unlikely